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*The Crystal Palace
and the Arts.*

by Edward Hall. F.S.A.

from the Freemason's Quar^{ly} Mag^{zine}

Oct. 1853



THE CRYSTAL PALACE AND THE ARTS

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by Edward Hall, F.S.A. - Architect.

WHATEVER of truth may appertain to the common supposition, that there is little resemblance between the Craft of Freemasonry of the present day and that of the Middle Ages, no worthy Brother of the Order can at any time regard attentively, the art and science of architecture, without becoming convinced of its importance to the progress of society, and without advancing to the conclusion, that the knowledge and practice of art in general, and the observation of beauty in works of architecture, sculpture, and painting, are worthy of every aid from governments and public associations.

The fact of the mutual relationship of these branches of art at all flourishing periods of their development, indeed is not more worthy of our consideration than that of their intimate connection with household fittings, furniture, and utensils. Whatever the precise nature of the labours of the old Freemasons—whether the Brethren are chiefly to be considered as the practical executors of the designs of others, or whether this Order as well as the priesthood, furnished the architects of the buildings, it is quite clear that the practical skill of the ordinary members of the Craft was far more favourable to the expression of art-works, than what we generally observe in artisans at the present time. There must have been great aptitude to feel the merits of such forms as were designed, and yet great self-denial in subordinating the efforts of individuals to one grand result. How strongly ~~and~~ does such a spirit contrast with that of modern artisans, up to this moment, in England ~~at least~~, where the least skilful are generally the most opinionative.

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lover of the older architecture may find points of inferior merit, as compared with the grand features of works of art in masonry, yet much withal that is strikingly beautiful and indeed sublime; and in which the modern building, it must be confessed, attains something of what has been so long sought for in the architecture of the present day—features strikingly its own.

Yet, there are some drawbacks which were inevitable in the manner in which the building had grown up. The equal heights of story above story, caused by repetition of the same castings, are fatal to all grace from proportion of parts. Bulk in general, and breadth of base in supports, too, are so essential to the idea of stability, even with those who are well acquainted with the strength of materials—and leaving out of consideration certain accidents in slender iron structures—that the building will in this respect, ever fail in one important particular.—The stunted towers at the intersections of the transepts, are positively unsightly, and can be improved only by the addition of domes, as in the manner suggested by Sir Charles Barry in the model which he exhibited last season at the Royal Academy.

On the other hand, we know of no building in England, where the spreading base and foreground of the structure have been managed with equal success. On the common neglect of these points—indispensable to architectural effect—much might be said,—although in the present case, the massiveness of the architectural foreground is too harshly contrasted by the superficial character of the edifice itself. We may see also in the combination of the structural forms of architecture with water and sylvan scenery, that of which the absence in other cases has, as much as anything else, led to errors in the design of public buildings, and to complaints from architects as to the comparative distaste for their art amongst the public. If our theory be correct, buildings such as Chatsworth, or Castle Howard, or many of the old baronial halls, will always impress the beholder, when the architecture of confined streets may fail to do so. In fact, the office of art is not, as too often supposed, the *imitation* of nature: it has rather to effect contrast, and be so, productive of reciprocal advantage. The banks of rivers—sites like those of Greenwich Hospital and the Houses of Parliament, therefore (other things being equal), are favourable to the estimation of architectural beauty, if only from their combination in the view, with the water. Thus, fountains may be amongst the most pleasing objects; and so, large open spaces are conducive to the same result, not only because they allow of a view from a proper distance, but because the eye can then take in a sufficient extent of the blue sky and rolling clouds. So,

even small shrubs and flowers, disposed about the building with artistic effect, contribute to the same result; and thus, the trees which line the footpaths in many continental cities, comprise advantages which our English street architecture has to but a limited extent. The private gardens in the large squares, enclosed by iron railings, are not so advantageous in this respect as, from their number, they might be; and even the parks are capable of great improvements in the laying out. Non-professional persons are, therefore, dependent for their appreciation of works of art upon that which Chevreul, in the case of colour, has called the *successive contrast*; that is to say, the power of retaining in the mind, consciously or unconsciously, previous images; or in this case, those of natural scenery. We therefore see, how completely our modern life in towns unfits us for the ~~complete~~ *fully* enjoyment of works of art, and how especially it must unfit us for the full perception of the beauty of *architecture*. We see, too, one reason why in Athens, under a beautiful sky, and on the commanding site of a rocky acropolis, architecture not only reached so high a state of perfection, but was fully appreciated by the *people*. We discover also what may be the value of sculpture as an essential part of architecture. Lastly; the works in progress at Sydenham lead us to augur the best results in relation to future development of art in England—from the *examples* of architecture and sculpture which will be exhibited indeed—but also from the opportunity for the observation of natural beauty newly afforded to the inhabitants of towns.

Our readers need not be told that the project of the Crystal Palace Company originated from the Exhibition of 1851. The value of that remarkable display as an educational agent—the means which it afforded of comparison and selection—pointed to the necessity for a permanent museum of materials and machinery, and of manufactured works, industrial and artistic. The impediments to such an institution previously, had been summed up in the expenses of ground and roof covering.—Some saw in the building in Hyde Park, a noble work of architecture, and on that account wished it preserved.

We are not undervaluing the great beauty of some features in the latter building, if we say that we do not wholly agree with the indiscriminate praise at first showered upon it in the newspapers, and which has since been modified. If people, unfamiliar with the principles of architectural design, would honestly examine the impression of their own feelings, or inquire into the cause thereof, instead of taking up the *dictum* of another who knows no better, simply because that has boldly appeared in print, real progress in architecture would be

In all these, great advantages seemed to be attainable by classification, which had been barely attempted in the Great Exhibition. Geology, mineralogy, and botany, were to be illustrated on a far greater scale than had ever before been attempted; and trees, plants, architecture, costumes, and manufactures, were to be so disposed, as to present, as far as practicable, a study of every country in the world.

The best description we could give of the present state of the project might be summed up in saying, that it does not show that any of these professions will not be followed up; whilst, in some respects, the plan has become much amplified. Nevertheless, a few details may be here recorded. The 500,000*l.* capital, in 100,000 shares of 5*l.* each, paid up in full (since increased to 750,000*l.*), was soon obtained; a charter was granted, and the first column was raised on the 5th August, 1852, in presence of a large concourse of persons eminent in the walks of literature and science, to about 600 of whom, a handsome entertainment was given by the contractors;—and though the original intention of opening in 1853 has not been realized, the speed with which the work will have been executed will be sufficiently marvellous, if what is now in hand be properly completed in May, 1854. The building in Hyde Park was not nearly completed at the time originally specified, nor was it quite so even at the day of opening; and in the present case it may be difficult enough, even with superior work, to prevent the admission of wet, which was the source of so much annoyance in the other case. Already, however, there is the best evidence of the interest which is taken in the scheme. The price of ground for building upon, in the neighbourhood has greatly increased; indeed, at the very commencement of their work, the Company disposed of 149 acres of surplus, at a profit of 51,000*l.* Every Sunday, the scene in the neighbourhood is not very unlike what was witnessed in Hyde Park.

The building is at the top of the hill on the west side of the Brighton Railway, and stands not quite north and south. From the west side, there is a noble view over Upper Norwood, and over London to the hills beyond, and on the east the prospect extends over "the garden of England." On this side is the park; and here the rapid descent of the ground at once rendered necessary an additional story, which is to be devoted to machinery, and to the various heating and steam apparatus.

Thus, with the other changes in the design and construction, opportunity has been taken to remedy some of the defects of the old building. The really meritorious features in the building in Hyde Park were the roof of the transept, and the ~~fine~~ effect of *remarkable*

perspective which so vast a number of columns, regularly disposed, admitted of. It was always a subject of regret that an arched roof did not cover the whole length of the nave, and it was further thought that the overlapping, so to speak, of the columns, as seen in the perspective of the farther end of the interior, was unfavourable to the ~~effect~~. We ourselves might be of opinion, without thinking they should necessarily be reproduced, that these features had their own particular advantages. There was, however, great want of harmony between the roofs of the nave and transept. In the new building, therefore, a fine effect has been realized by carrying the arched roof (forty-four feet higher) over the whole length of the nave, and by projecting a pair of columns, twenty-four feet apart, for the support of the main arched ribs, eight feet in advance of every fourth twenty-four feet space throughout the length of the nave and transepts. Moreover, there are now three transepts, the centre one, as our readers have learned elsewhere, having to be covered by a roof with the enormous span of 120 feet. Roofs of that character, the Freemasons of the Middle Ages never attempted, although they raised vaultings of stone on slender supports to great heights. The centre transept reaches 200 feet or more in height, and the end transepts reach 150 feet. On the park side, externally, they have large arched recesses, twenty-four feet deep, enclosing open galleries, from which, as before intimated, there is a ~~fine~~ view over the county of Kent. With these alterations, the new building, though shorter than the old one by 240 feet, is a much greater work. Looking at a cross section of that last-mentioned building, it will be recollected that the two upper of the three stories, were "set back" from the front on each side, to a very considerable distance,—so that the effect of the vast size was never properly realized externally, and decorations intended to be seen were never seen at all. This, and the roofless appearance, were blunders which would have been quite inexcusable in any other case. Such mistakes in the present building have been to a great extent avoided; though the retention of the ridge and furrow system of roofing has not allowed the possibility of avoiding them altogether. The merits of this system, the sole peculiarity in the suggestion as made to the Building Committee, and that not the invention of Sir Joseph Paxton as asserted, we have never heard explained. Its defects must be great in reference to cost of keeping in repair; and by the use of it we lose the appearance of a roof, or the actual terrace, one or other of which would seem to be the proper termination to a building.

*result**of*

Adjoining the edifice at each end, but detached, is a lofty tower, formed by galleries of iron-work round a chimney. This structure is, we believe, to support a water-tank. The towers have as yet no great merit. One of them was originally intended to form the terminus to the branch railway, and was to be united by a covered way with the palace.

Standing upon one of the upper galleries in the building, the scene below is interesting to one who would continue the parallel which we suggested at the outset. Instead of progressing, with often a cessation of years, and then with works resumed in a new style of architecture, this great work grows steadily into realization. No work, probably, has given employment to a greater number of individuals, and yet in none have the mechanical resources for saving labour been developed to so great an extent.

Amongst the objects of interest in the interior, the principal are the courts representing separate styles of architecture, and filled with casts and objects of interest in the respective styles. The Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Moorish, Byzantine, and Norman, Mediæval, Renaissance, and Italian styles, have their respective localities. The collection of casts from statues and groups in all parts of Europe, and from architectural ornaments,—in extent, variety, and instructive value, is beyond the power of any description that we can here afford. The collection of busts of individuals of every age and country is the most extraordinary and interesting ever brought together.

In another part of the building a complete *fac simile* of part of a Pompeian house, with most elaborate and beautiful decorations, approaches completion. It is worthy of remark, as a matter which is highly suggestive, that the workmen employed, both here and in putting together the casts, are almost all foreigners.

But, art is not receiving exclusively, attention. Valuable statements of *desiderata* for the collection, in the departments of Ethnology, Raw Materials, and Natural History, have been issued, and much has already been got together. Life-sized representations of men of all countries are to be given, with the dress, arms, implements and utensils appertaining to them. Quadrupeds, birds, reptiles, fish and mollusca, are all to appear, as near as possible, in their natural state,—the fish as though in water. Representations of extinct animals, as the Megatherium, and Plesiosaurus, of their original dimensions, are in progress.

The directors are engaged upon a great design, one which, we believe, they sincerely put forth as something far beyond a

commercial speculation of theirs. Our manufacturers and inventors now require that publicity for their works which once they feared. The education of the large body of the people must be made a national concern, and have every facility which can be afforded. In knowledge of art, and especially of architecture, much has to be learned. Great part of the continent of Europe; America, and even Scotland within our reach, have all been long alive to the national importance of matters in education, which in England we still neglect. There is much lost ground to be recovered. Therefore, since the work has to be done, we are glad that, in one respect, means will be at our doors for doing that work in the best way, namely, by instruction through the eye.

But, more than this, the cities of our empire must no longer grow up at hap-hazard, and with all noxious elements, such as we hear of in Melbourne, and which are merely *less* obvious at home. As cities, positively they should possess advantages,—not become the *foci* of disease, of ignorance, and of degrading and brutalizing vice.

Recreation for the people is one of the points which must no longer be disregarded, and that must be of an elevating kind. The haughty indifference of classes one to another must be broken down. In truth, all, whether rich or poor, independent of labour or hard-handed, have much to learn—one from another.

The Crystal Palace Company are engaged in a great experiment, one which if it fail will be disastrous to them. We have every hope that the precedents of the attendance at the Great Exhibition, though apparently a peculiar case, have not been reasoned from unfairly; and so long as the directors are animated by their present spirit, they will have the best wishes, not only of ourselves, but, we may answer for it, of the entire body of Freemasons.
